

Eleven's Presents by pathvain aelien

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Summary: Eleven gives her friends their Christmas gifts.

Eleven's Presents

For iron, who came up with an amazing idea, and kindly let me play with it. I hope you enjoy it. And thank you for educating me about nosebleeds.

This fic takes place within "The First Christmas," but also exists as a stand-alone story.

Eleven's Presents

"A Christmas party, mom? Are you sure about this?" Jonathan asks his mom. Joyce gives him a distracted smile but doesn't answer. Most of her attention is focused on the boys, who are lugging boxes of decorations in from the shed. Jonathan can't understand why she's suddenly in such a festive mood. The last couple of months have had their ups and downs (and *Upside Downs*) and she is still mourning Bob. They *all* are. Jonathan is still dealing with that guilt. He didn't give Bob a chance, and he should have. He knows that now. In the short time he was a part of their lives, he was a good father to them. To *Will*. He knows the grief is even worse for his mom and he doesn't want her to take on too much. He's hesitant about phrasing it like that for her because she's so stubborn, so he tries to laugh it off as a jest.

"I thought you'd never want to look at another Christmas light again, after last year," he jokes, and she finally gives him her full attention. She sees his worry for her and smiles. Gives him a hug. Their family is not a normal family, that's true. And they have been through so much over the past year. So much pain. But she knows how lucky she is, despite all of that. She has two extraordinary children. Two sweet boys. Joyce firmly believes that she has the best children in the world, and she's so grateful for that.

"Honey, nothing would make me happier than this party," she says softly. He's gazing at her intently, making sure she's being honest. It seems like she is, and he relaxes a little.

"We have so much to celebrate this year," she continues, and her gaze lands on her youngest son. The one she almost lost. Twice. Will is

burrowing through a box of old ornaments, giggling as he unearths his earliest artistic creations. He shows one off to Eleven, who laughs. Jonathan watches his mother watching *them*, sees the soft look she gives them both, and capitulates. Joyce may be grieving Bob, but she is still happy. And he knows that part of her suddenly festive spirit is due to Eleven's return. The loss of such a brave, sweet, lonely girl had hit her hard last year. Jonathan's well aware that Joyce would like to give Will a normal Christmas. But he also knows that Eleven is a major factor as well. She's never been to a Christmas party before, or even had a Christmas. And Will clearly wants to celebrate with his friends, now that he's finally okay and the shadow has truly left him.

"Besides, I *love* Christmas lights," Joyce tells him, eyes twinkling.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah." And she does. The Christmas lights helped save her youngest son last year. Without them, she wouldn't have found him. She would have given up on him. The lights showed her that Will was alive. She will always, *always* love Christmas lights.

They smile at each other, and then Jonathan retreats to the kitchen to start dinner. Headlights shine in the driveway and she moves to open the door. Hopper has consented to deliver her tree.

"Hey, El, can you hand me that box?" Lucas asks her. She's been considering Will's old ornaments, turning one over in her hand to examine it. She doesn't know what it is, or what it is even *supposed* to be. She only knows it's lumpy and misshapen. It reminds her of the potato she microwaved too long the first time she helped Hopper with dinner. She tosses it back into its box. She turns to see which box Lucas is pointing at, because there are *a lot* of boxes. Eleven had no idea that Christmas required so much *stuff*, or so many people to help with that stuff.

Lucas is pointing to a large, slightly dented box. Someone has written *Lights/Star/Mantle* on one side. She's not sure what that means, but it doesn't matter. She will find out soon. The box looks heavy, though, and it's underneath an even larger one. And some sparkly stuff Will calls *tinsel*. She's not sure she can lift the box. With her arms, anyway.

The guys turn to gawp as the top box is gently lifted and set down on the coffee table. Without anyone actually touching it. The tinsel doesn't even slide off. Will gives Eleven a little smile, but she's concentrating, head lowered. The bottom box makes its way smoothly through the room toward Lucas, coming to rest right in his lap.

"Well," Lucas says, inanely. They all laugh. "That's not exactly what I was expecting, but it works. Thanks," He tells her, and she smiles. She sniffs tentatively, and Mike hands her a napkin without even thinking about it.

"That was more awesome than what you were expecting," Dustin informs him, and they laugh again, because it's true. The laughter comes to an abrupt halt when Hopper thrusts an enormous tree through the door. Or tries to, because it gets lodged halfway. Eleven notices that it seems to be too large to fit through the doorway, because Hopper is cursing. He's using very interesting words that she hasn't heard before, or that she's heard only rarely. Hopper attempts to shove the tree through the door, but it doesn't budge. Joyce takes the other end and pulls, but the tree is stuck fast. Hopper gives up and clambers over it instead, getting tree sap everywhere.

"Um. Hop?" It's Dustin. He's taken to shortening Hopper's name, just for the hell of it. He knows how much it pisses him off to be addressed with such familiarity. He can't believe he ever used to be terrified of Hopper. Hopper still gets angry pretty frequently, that's true, but he's basically a big teddy bear now. *Eleven's* teddy bear, that is.

"Don't call me that," Hopper snaps. "And we could use a little help with the tree. You know, if you guys aren't too busy or anything," and Dustin marvels at the sheer amount of sarcasm in that one sentence.

"Why don't you just ask Eleven?" He queries, stretching out on the sofa instead. "She could do it without even getting up. And then we wouldn't all get covered in sap," he says, giving Hopper's grungy pants a pointed look.

Hopper heaves a sigh.

"No. There are seven healthy, able-bodied people in this room, and if they got up off their asses, we could get this tree through the damn door," he says.

"It would be less energy wasted if just one person did it. You know, one person who can do it without even blinking. That's just *science*," Dustin retorts.

"No. That would be taking advantage of her. We aren't going to use her power as a tool."

"Uh, why not?" Lucas asks.

"Yeah. How is it any different from like, asking someone strong to open a jar? If you can't do it, you ask the person who *can* do it for help. That's just *logic*," Dustin says. He sees Lucas staring at him and quickly adds, "Not that I can't open a jar. I totally can." Lucas rolls his eyes.

Eleven sees the expression on Hopper's face. He's starting to turn red and his eyes are getting small. That means he is getting cranky. She gives a tiny sigh, because he is cranky a lot. And she is tired of the arguing. She can help, and she doesn't *mind* helping. So she does, without any warning. The tree gives an enormous lurch and shoots into the living room like a festive missile. Hopper dives out of the way and needles fly everywhere. The boys are howling at the look of astonishment on Hopper's face.

She catches Mike's eye, and they both grin. She raises the napkin to her nose again. Hopper gives her a sour look, but grudgingly thanks her.

"Don't do all the work for them," he tells her. "They have arms and legs. Presumably they can use them."

She shrugs and returns her attention to the ornament box, but Dustin is indignant.

"Hey! I'm working," he exclaims in an injured voice. They all turn to regard him dubiously. He's leafing through a comic and has his feet up on the sofa. Eleven knows that's not allowed, because Hopper has

told her. Although he does it himself every night after work.

"Dustin, maybe you could find the stockings, please?" Joyce asks him gently, and he immediately closes the comic.

"See? Manners will get you everywhere," Dustin sing-songs to Hopper, before turning to the boxes and rifling through them. Hopper gives him an odd look. It's half fond, half irritable. He and Joyce lug the tree into an upright position.

"Mike, can you hand me that stand?" She asks, voice muffled by the tree. He does.

Will is bored with the ornaments. They were hilarious at first, because they are freaking awful, but he looks at them every year, and the amusement doesn't last long, once he's verified that they actually look worse than the year before. He dumps them back into an empty box, because they sure as hell won't be decorating the tree any time soon. Or ever. Joyce pleads for him to use them every year, but he's always insistent. He's created much nicer ornaments since then, and he doesn't want the uglier ones on the tree.

He stands up and stretches. "You guys thirsty?" The guys shake their heads, but Eleven nods. He beckons her to follow him and they head into the kitchen. Jonathan is slicing bread and buttering it. He looks up when they enter, and waves the butter-knife. Will immediately heads for the fridge, but Eleven smiles at him in greeting. She likes Jonathan a lot, even though she hasn't talked to him much.

Will is halfway inside the fridge, rifling through the bottom drawers. "Let's see...juice. A lot of juice, actually. Water. Milk. Soda?" He asks, and sees her face. "Oh. Right." He closes the fridge. "Cocoa?" He knows her fondness for cocoa. She's only had it once before, but she drank three mugs that day, so maybe that counts as three times. He's already opening the cabinet. She doesn't respond and he glances over. She's looking at the fridge intently. He moves to stand next to her, to see what caught her attention.

The fridge is covered in pictures, and Eleven *loves* pictures. She doesn't even care if she actually knows the people in them; she just likes looking at them. Seeing all the happy memories. She doesn't

have any pictures of her friends yet, but Will has *lots*. There is one of Mike and Will, dressed up as Luke and Han. She knows who Luke and Han are, because she's seen *Star Wars* with them. Mike is holding a lightsaber. She smiles at it.

"Trick or treat?" She asks, but Will shakes his head.

"Um, no. Not for Halloween. We just dressed up, and Jonathan took it. He's good at that."

"Why?"

"Um. We just thought it would be cool," he mumbles. He seems embarrassed. She knows what embarrassed is, because it means you turn red. And Will is very red right now, but she isn't sure why. The picture *does* look cool, and she likes it a lot.

She considers each picture very carefully. Most of the pictures are of Will and his-*their*-friends, although there are a few of Jonathan. Eleven senses that Jonathan doesn't have many friends, and that makes her sad, until she remembers that he has Nancy now. They are *more than friends*, although there are no pictures of Nancy on the fridge.

Her attention shifts to Will's drawings. He is very good, much better than she is. She can barely do stick figures. His pictures actually look like the things he has drawn. Will watches her with a little smile on his face, because she just looks so intense. As if she is studying each one and it's a matter of grave importance. Her hand rests lightly on each one, before moving to the next. He returns to the cabinet, pulling out mugs and hunting up the cocoa mix. He only turns back when he hears a gasp. It's unusual, because she is usually silent. Even when she's communicating, she's pretty quiet.

"What's wrong?" he asks her, hurriedly dropping the mugs on the counter near the sink. She doesn't answer, because she can't.

She has been studying each picture carefully. There is a nice one of a wizard shooting fireballs. It's very colorful and pretty. When she's finished looking at that one, her gaze falls on the picture right next to it. It's the picture that makes her gasp. There is a girl, in the picture.

She can tell the figure is a girl, even though her hair is short. It's so short; she almost doesn't have any at all. She has her hand raised against a monster. Her nose is bleeding, but she doesn't look hurt. She looks powerful. Her friends are behind her, and she is protecting them. She looks like what Dustin calls a *hero*.

The picture is *her*.

She places her finger on the edge of the picture, and looks at Will. He's relieved to see that she doesn't look upset, just surprised. Her eyes ask him a question.

"Yeah. That's you," he tells her quietly, but she still looks confused.

"How...how did...?" she trails off, because she's run out of words, at least temporarily.

"Um. Well. They told me what it was like, that night. And I just thought it would be a nice picture. You aren't...you aren't upset, are you? I just thought it made you look awesome. I mean, you saved us all that night," he says.

"No. Not upset." And she's not. But she is extremely puzzled. "When... *when* did you draw it?"

"Last year."

The confusion deepens. "Last year? But..."

"Yeah. We hadn't actually met yet. Well, not really, since I didn't really get a good look at you when I was, you know, *there*," he says, referring to the Upside Down.

"Then...how did...?"

She falls silent, but it's okay, he knows what she means. "Oh. Well, I talked to everyone about you. And they all talked about you a lot, too. Like, every day. And I couldn't remember what you'd looked like, when you were *there* with me, so I asked people to describe you. Mom helped me a lot. I wasn't sure if, you know, if it was very accurate, but..." he trails off uncomfortably and shrugs.

"But what?"

"Well. Um. Mike saw it. When he came over one day. And it uh, made him really upset. Because that's when you..." he trails off again, horrified. He almost said *died*. "...disappeared. He didn't like seeing it." Understatement of the year, but he really doesn't want to think about it. The broken look on his friend's face. Mike had wanted to throw it away, not because it was of *her*, but because it was that moment. The moment they all lost her. But that wasn't the only reason. Mike had cried for a long time.

I don't even have a picture of her.

It was true; there were no pictures of her. He had only known her for a week, and there hadn't exactly been time. Will knew how hard that had been for Mike. It had been like she never existed. He thinks now about telling Eleven, and telling her what he had done for Mike *after* that conversation, but he decides against it. It's not the right time. Maybe it never will be, because it's still a sad memory, and she's home now. They don't have to think about that anymore.

"But that's how I knew I had to be pretty close, anyway. To what you looked like," he finishes instead. He watches her, making sure it's okay that he has this picture. It can't be a pleasant memory for *her*, either, after all. But she actually looks happy. She *is* happy, happy that he wanted to be her friend. Even back then, when he hadn't known her. She's happy that he has made her into a hero. And he has given her an idea. She smiles at him and he sighs a little, relieved.

"I like it," she says. And just like that, her attention moves elsewhere. She looks at the cocoa and he laughs. Gets back to work. When the cocoa is finished (he planned ahead and made enough for everyone, since he knows the guys will change their minds as soon as they see Will and Eleven drink theirs), he calls for them to come get it.

Mike shakes marshmallows into his, and looks at Eleven. She gives a tiny nod and he garnishes hers as well. Lucas and Dustin have already headed back into the living room. He can hear them clearly, because their voices carry.

"Time for a smoke break!" Dustin says happily, settling down onto the

couch.

"Uh, you don't smoke, dumbass," Lucas points out.

"It's the same general idea," Dustin shrugs. "Besides, Hopper does, and he seriously looks like he could use one."

Mike rolls his eyes and goes to join them, at the very least to make sure Hopper doesn't murder them. Will moves to follow, but Eleven is lingering. He gives her a curious look, but she's staring at Jonathan. He raises his eyebrows and she glances at him, then back at Jonathan. Will isn't Mike, but he gets the hint anyway, and joins the guys in the living room without further ado.

Jonathan is chopping tomatoes and onions for the salad. He feels the intensity of her gaze and glances up from the cutting board. He sees she's alone. Sees she's just staring at him. It's a little unnerving and a little odd, but so is she. She's actually more than a *little* odd, but he likes that. He likes abnormality, because he's a little odd himself. He doesn't know her well, but he actually thinks she's pretty cool. He would like her even if she hadn't saved Will's life. Twice.

He waits for her to say something, but she doesn't. She's just standing perfectly still and looking at him, so he prompts her.

"Hey. Everything okay?"

She responds immediately, so it's obvious to him that she was just waiting for him to initiate a conversation.

"Help," she says, and he loses his head completely.

"*Shit*. What's wrong? Are you hurt? Are you sick? *What happened?*" His hand is shaking and it can't hold the knife any longer, so he lets go. It slides off the cutting board and onto the floor, but he doesn't notice.

"No."

"No? You aren't hurt?"

"No. Not hurt."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." She seems to realize that he's terrified, and that *she's* the one who terrified him, and she adds, "Sorry."

He exhales with relief, running his hands through his hair. His hands are still shaking.

"That-that's okay."

She's watching him with a mixture of worry and fear.

"I'm not mad. I'm just glad you're okay," he says reassuringly, and gives her a smile. It relaxes her and she returns it.

"What...um, what did you need help with?"

She turns her head toward the living room, where the guys are. Turns back to Jonathan. He doesn't know her well, but he's good at picking up on emotional cues. Just like Will.

"It's a secret? You don't want them to know?"

She nods.

"Okay. No problem. Um, you want to go outside for a minute? So they won't overhear?"

She nods again.

"Okay," he says, and opens the back door. He's a little curious. He's actually more than a little curious to know what she could possibly need from *him*, although he hopes she relaxes a little. She's a lot more taciturn when she's not with her friends, and the conversation could take a long time without actually using words. He just hopes the lasagna doesn't burn in the oven until then.

Mike and the guys have their own secret. They have pooled their money (well, okay, and some of Joyce's money, too) on Eleven's Christmas gift. *Gifts*, actually, because there are four of them. They've intended to give them to her on Christmas day, but the upcoming party has thrown a wrinkle into their plans.

"Should we just bring them to the party?" Dustin asks in a very quiet voice, so Hopper won't hear. He knows there's a strong likelihood of imminent homicide if Hopper discovers their gifts. And unfortunately, he will discover them very soon.

"I guess," Lucas says sarcastically, "it would be *kind of* weird if we didn't give her a gift, since that's the whole point of the party, and everything."

"Shut up," Dustin says absently. He looks at Mike, because Mike is usually in charge. Especially when it comes to Eleven. Mike shakes his head at once. Decisively.

"No. She gets the-" but Dustin shushes him and gestures frantically at Hopper.

"Sorry. She gets the *presents* on Christmas day."

"But Mike, it's a *gift-giving* party. Therefore we need *gifts*."

"Christmas day," Mike reiterates.

"It's close enough! The party's a *week* before Christmas. And they're Christmas gifts, no matter when she actually gets them," Lucas argues.

"*Christmas. Day.*" He mutters it through clenched teeth.

"But why?" Will asks.

Mike sighs as if they are all very dim. It's *obvious*, to him anyway. "It's her first Christmas! Her first real Christmas! If we don't give her the...*presents*...on Christmas day, she probably won't get anything that day. And she needs to have that experience. Like, sitting under the tree and actually getting presents, normal Christmas kind of thing."

"I'm sure Hopper will get her something," Will says. They all glance at Hopper, who is angrily untangling lights and smoking a cigarette. Will sighs and Dustin looks half-convinced.

"Hopper's gift probably blows, anyway," Dustin says, and Mike

shrugs.

"I don't know. He cares about her a lot." He says it grudgingly, because he still has a problem with Hopper. He always will. But he's also grateful for him, because Eleven needs a father, and Hopper is trying to step into that role. "But even if he gives her an awesome gift, she should still get ours. *On Christmas day*," he snaps, because Lucas has opened his mouth to speak. "We're her *friends*," he says simply, as if that clinches it. As if friends are more important than anyone else in the world, including cranky father figures. And for these friends, it's true. They all come first with each other.

Lucas sighs. He can tell he's going to lose this battle, because Will always sides with Mike, and Dustin will be swayed by both of them.

"Fine. She gets her presents on Christmas day. Whatever."

"What about the party, though? Won't it be weird if we don't give her something then?" Dustin asks, and Lucas looks irritated.

"*Another* gift? *Seriously*? I spent, like, my allowance for two months on that gift," he growls. They both turn to Mike.

"You don't have to get her another gift," Mike groans, rolling his eyes in disgust. "We'll just tell her that she'll get them on Christmas."

"Uh, if you want her to have like, a normal and happy Christmas, maybe you shouldn't make her come to a *gift-giving party* and then not actually, you know, *give her any gifts*," Lucas tells him.

"That does suck, man," Dustin agrees, and Mike throws his arms up in disgust. Some of his cocoa sloshes over the rim of the cup and onto the couch. It's quite a lot of cocoa, actually. Mike gives Joyce a guilty look, but she hasn't noticed anything. She's crouching next to Hopper and sorting lights. The boys give each other meaningful looks and Will casually slides a pillow over the wet splotch. There. No one will notice. None of them think about actually trying to clean it.

"Sorry," Mike says. Will shrugs.

"Anyway, just get her something little for the party, and we'll tell her she'll get the real present later," Mike finishes.

"Like what? What does she like?" Lucas asks, and Dustin sniggers immediately.

"Mike," Dustin answers, and they both howl. Mike turns pink and tries to hit him, forgetting the mug in his hand. Again. They all watch as cocoa slops out. Onto the couch. Again. Will sighs. They watch silently as he moves another pillow over the second stain.

"Mike, you idiot. You should have aimed for the original stain," Dustin tells him wisely. Mike gives him a sour look but keeps his mug carefully in both hands.

"Anyway," Mike says, as if nothing has happened, "Just give her some Eggos or something at the party. She'll be really happy with that."

"She would have been happy with that, *anyway*," Lucas grumbles, but it's a good-natured grumble. Eggos are pretty cheap, and it *would* suck for her to just sit there while everyone else opens presents. "I guess that would work, though. I'd kind of feel bad if she gives me a gift and I don't have anything for her, like, right then."

This reminds Mike of something. Something very important.

"Um. Guys."

"Yeah?" Dustin asks for the others.

"About Eleven's gifts..."he trails off, takes a quick glance around the room. She must still be in the kitchen.

"The...*you know*?" Dustin asks, but Mike shakes his head.

"No. Her gifts to you guys."

"Oh," Lucas says, and then just waits.

"Um. Some of them might be a little...a little, you know. Um."

"*Weird*?" Lucas grins.

"No! Not weird," Mike says, offended on her behalf.

"No?"

"Well. Maybe a little?"

Lucas snorts. "And that's breaking news, *how*?"

Mike glares at him and Lucas holds up his hands in surrender. Luckily *his* cocoa is gone.

"I didn't mean it as an *insult*. It's just, you know. Not a *surprise*. First time buying gifts and everything," Lucas explains. Mike looks mollified.

"Anyway. So, she put a lot of thought into them, and really tried to get you guys something she thought was special. So, um. You know."

"Be happy whenever we open them?" Will asks gently, and Mike nods with relief.

"No problem," Lucas says, and his voice is gentle, too. That's unusual, coming from Lucas. "We'll like whatever she gets us. It will be kind of cool to see what she comes up with, actually." Lucas turns to Dustin and Will. "Right, guys?" Will nods immediately. He's unfailingly polite and he really *will* like whatever she gets him.

Dustin scoffs. "Duh, dude. It's not like we were going to tell her they suck." Will and Lucas both hit him this time. "*If* they suck! Jesus. *Which they won't*. Or if they do, it's okay. We won't care."

"Thanks," Mike tells them.

"Don't thank us. *We're* her friends, too," Will reminds him. Mike smiles at him. Somehow he keeps forgetting that. He still hasn't forgotten how Lucas and Dustin (mostly Lucas) treated her last year. Last year, *Mike* had been her only real friend. He's happy they are all growing closer now, and definitely happy for Eleven, because she both needs and deserves people who care about her. But it makes him a little sad, too, although he's trying not to dwell on it.

"How weird, exactly?" Dustin asks curiously. Mike doesn't answer, so he glances at Lucas. Lucas is already looking at him. They meet each other's eyes and snort with laughter. This is going to be *awesome*, he

thinks. Mike's relieved expression has faded and he's looking annoyed with them again, so Will hastily changes the subject.

"How is Operation Fluffy Bottom, anyway?" he asks Dustin.

"Uh, what?" Lucas goggles at him.

"Operation Fluffy Bottom."

"I thought it was Operation Kitten," Lucas says, forgetting to keep his voice down when they mention the word *kitten*.

"That's not very original, Lucas," Dustin tells him in a superior voice.

"Uh, *whatever*. Operation Fluffy Bottom sounds like a disease."

"Shut up, Lucas," Dustin snaps.

There's a long moment of silence.

"WELL?"

"Well *what*, Lucas?"

"*How. Is. It. Going.*"

"How's what going?"

"You know what I mean," Lucas snarls.

"Say it."

"Say what?"

"Say it. Right now."

"No."

Mike and Will meet each other's eyes. They seem to sigh and laugh at the same time.

"Say Fluffy Bottom."

"FINE. How is fucking Operation Fluffy Bottom fucking doing. *Asshole*."

"There," Dustin says, pleased. "Thank you." He smiles at his friend.

"WELL?"

"Oh. Fine. Mom's getting kind of attached but I'm pretty sure she'll give them back."

"WHAT?" Lucas yelps. "*Pretty sure? Pretty sure*, Dustin? Shit. I did not waste two months allowance for your mom to become a cat lady."

"No, you did that for *Eleven* to become a cat lady. Besides, my mom already *was* a cat lady."

Mike's tuned them out. It's just necessary sometimes. Frequently. He's glad he was able to warn the guys about Eleven's gifts before she rejoined them. That gives him a jolt, because they've been talking for a long time. They've been talking for a long time, and Eleven still hasn't joined them. He tries to keep the panicky feeling at bay. She is just in the kitchen. She is fine. There are no monsters and she's not going anywhere. The mantra doesn't really work, because he can't help feeling terrified whenever she's out of sight. He hasn't forgotten what it felt like, while she was gone. When she was presumed lost or dead. When he thought he would never see her again. When she had just vanished into thin air.

Lucas and Dustin forget their squabbling when Mike suddenly leaps up from the sofa.

"What? What's wrong?" Lucas asks, because Mike's eyes look huge and his mouth is stretched into a grimace.

"Mike. She's fine," Will tells him quietly, but Mike's already in the kitchen. The *empty* kitchen. He takes it all in at a glance. The half-finished salad. The knife on the floor. He gives his friends a terrified look.

"What? What is it?" Lucas asks, and Dustin prods him.

"Eleven," he says simply.

"Mike. She's fine." It's Will. He's using his most soothing voice. He's perfected it over the last couple of months with his mom.

"Where is she?" The soothing voice is not working on Mike.

"Maybe sucking face with Jonathan," Dustin jokes to cut the tension, and it works. They all look at him with revulsion.

"Dude. He's like, *way* older than Eleven. That's gross."

"I'm just saying, maybe she gave up on Mike asking her to the Snow Ball," Dustin teases. Lucas laughs but Mike still looks frantic. He throws the back door open and the tension immediately leaves his body. He takes a deep breath while Will looks at him in concern. She's right there. Right in front of him. She's just talking to Jonathan. She hasn't noticed them, crammed into the doorway.

"Hey, is something burning?" Dustin asks loudly, and that catches their attention.

"*Shit!*" Jonathan cries, and pushes past them to check on the lasagna. He breathes a sigh of relief. It's okay. The outermost edges are a little black and curled, but the rest is fine. Definitely edible, unlike most of his mother's cooking.

Eleven makes a much more sedate entrance. She's instantly concerned at the look on Mike's face, because she knows that look. She saw it very often in the mirror, over the last year. She saw it on his face the night she disappeared. She gives him a little half-smile.

"Mike."

"Yeah?"

"I'm okay," she tells him gently. He smiles and sighs at the same time. The combination should confuse her, but she understands it perfectly. It's how *she* feels. Knowing what she's missed over the past year, and the happiness that comes from being with her friends now. From being with *him* again.

"Promise?" They both laugh.

"Promise."

The guys let them have their little moment, and without any teasing, because it's clear they both need it. Maybe they will need it frequently until they both start to heal.

After dinner, Hopper relents and asks for Eleven's help. The kind of help only she can give. She concentrates and untangles the lights that have been plaguing him. He ruffles her hair in thanks and she ducks away.

"These, kid, are lights. You put them on a tree."

She stares at him blankly. "I know."

"Oh. Well, then, toss them to Dustin, let him help out." He quickly amends the order, because she's just so damned literal and he doesn't want to deal with the fucking lights again. "I mean, *hand* them to him."

She does. Dustin and Lucas position themselves around the tree and string them. Mike and Eleven hang ornaments while Will carefully decides which ornaments are worthy of being on the tree this year. He offers a box of ornaments to Jonathan, who shakes his head. Jonathan has his camera, and he just wants to observe.

"Spread them out a little, kind of evenly all over the tree," Mike says, because Eleven is carefully placing them right next to each other and the branch is sagging. She complies, rearranging them more evenly. He smiles at her and holds out a dark green one. She reaches out to take it and her fingers brush lightly against his. She smiles at him a little. His heart gives a pathetic jump and his mouth suddenly feels a little dry. He catches Dustin's eyes. Dustin is shaking his head and trying not to laugh. Mike pretends not to see him, and continues handing Eleven ornaments.

"Okay," Hopper says, "here we go." He pauses, because it's Joyce's house and Joyce's tree, and he doesn't want to just take over. She gives him a smile, so he continues. He turns to Will. Will is ready.

"Star or angel?" He asks his mom.

"Whatever you want," she tells him with a smile. He gives the choice the consideration it deserves, and selects the star. He hands it to Hopper, who passes it to Eleven. She takes it reverently.

"It goes on top," he says, just in case she doesn't know, and points. She looks at Will and Jonathan, making sure this is okay. She senses that usually someone else would do this. It's not *her* tree, after all. They both grin at her. Jonathan is poised to snap a picture. She holds the star flat in her hands and starts to focus, but Hopper is firm.

"Not that way," he says.

"No?"

"Not this time. Your first time, you've got to do it the old-fashioned and completely non-supernatural way."

She nods, then looks at the top of the tree. It's very tall. She can't reach it that way. Mike pushes something toward her and unfolds it. It looks like stairs, but it's too small. And they don't lead anywhere. He places it at the foot of the tree and stands back. She looks at him and he sees the question.

"It's a step-ladder," he says. "You use it to reach things that you couldn't reach otherwise. Just go up one rung at a time, and be careful. Hold on with one hand," he cautions, then shuts up at the look on Lucas's face. He suddenly sounds more like a dad than Hopper, since Hopper sure isn't giving her any safety tips.

She hesitantly climbs the ladder and he can't resist. He holds it steady just in case. Hopper quirks a grin at him and he ignores it. She'd probably be fine anyway, he thinks, assuming she could use her own power to stop herself if she fell. He's not sure how that would work, actually, so he holds the ladder tightly.

"I bet you anything he either climbs up there after her, *just in case*," Lucas tells Dustin, putting emphasis on the latter words to illustrate the idiocy of the sentiment, "or he helps her back down."

"Or both. I bet he *carries* her down."

"Uh, he can't carry her. He can't really carry *anything*," Lucas whispers

back.

"True," Dustin says, and then Will shushes them both.

"That's good," Hopper says, and she stops climbing. She peers down at them all, catching Mike's eyes because he's looking up at her. They smile at each other at the same moment, and Jonathan snaps a picture. Eleven carefully places the star on top of the tree. She waits.

"Looks good, kid. Climb back down."

Climbing down is a little harder, because she can't really see her feet to find the rungs. Mike offers her a hand and she takes it, holding tightly as he helps her back down.

Thank you.

She thinks it tentatively, not sure he will hear her. It only works sometimes, if they are thinking at each other at the same time.

You're welcome. And I heard you. Obviously.

They both laugh, and Lucas rolls his eyes at Dustin. They don't have telepathic powers, but Dustin hears him, loud and clear.

Told you.

"Okay, ready?" Hopper turns to Joyce again. "What do you usually do when you light the tree?"

"Huh?"

"I mean, music, whatever. Or do you just light them?"

"Music," Will and Jonathan say as one. The brothers share a look, and then Jonathan heads to get the music, while Will stands ready at the light switch.

"Get comfortable," he tells his friends, and they sit as one on the couch. Eleven starts to move a pillow but Mike and Lucas stop her at the same time. They look a little agitated and they are shaking their heads so she leaves the pillow where it is, and just sits beside it

instead. It means she has to sit closer to Mike, but neither of them mind *that* in the slightest. She leaves room for Hopper on her other side, but Hopper shakes his head and gestures to the lights. He gives her a smile, and she returns it.

"*This*, Will, is the time for cocoa. You jumped the gun earlier," Dustin tells him sadly, but Will only shrugs.

"You didn't exactly say no to it earlier, now did you?"

"No. But I wouldn't say no to it *now*, either."

The carefully chosen Christmas music is playing, and Jonathan returns to the living room. Will flips the switch, and Hopper is about to plug in the lights when Eleven stops him. It's one word, but it definitely indicates a delay. He actually doesn't mind. He's having *fun*.

"Cocoa," she says. Lucas and Dustin cheer.

Will turns the lights back on.

"I'm on it," Jonathan says.

A few minutes later, they're back in position, mugs in hand.

"Keep it in your cup this time, asshole," Dustin reproaches Mike. He ignores him, because he's busy shaking marshmallows into their drinks.

"Okay. Everyone ready now?" There are murmurs of assent.

"You sure? Nothing *else* you need to do?" Silence.

"Okay. Will, the light, please." Will obliges.

"Okay. Last chance." He waits, and then plugs in the lights. Waits again.

"Nothing happened," Eleven tells him, and Dustin laughs.

"I am actually aware of that, Eleven. Thank you," Hopper sighs.

"Will." Will doesn't need further instructions; the lights are already back on. Hopper and Joyce get back to work.

Dustin and Lucas are trading comics. They're able to do that, because they carry a few with them at all times. Will and Jonathan are stacking the boxes they won't need, at least not until January 10th, which is always the day when Joyce can no longer stand to have Christmas decorations in her house.

Eleven sets her empty mug onto the coffee table and leans back against the couch. She yawns. Mike catches it from her and yawns, too. She laughs.

"Tired?"

"A little," she says. And she is. But in a good way. She doesn't mind being awake, and with her friends. So many of these people are on her list. It makes Eleven feel perfectly content. She rests her head on Mike's shoulder. She doesn't think twice about it, because it's natural. And she's done it before. He smiles a little, and then leans his head to rest on hers.

"Oh! Hey, El, look at this. Have you seen one of these before?" Will's unearthed a couple of snow globes, artifacts from several years ago when he was obsessed with them. Her head lifts from Mike's shoulder and she crosses the room to Will. Mike watches her join Will with a little pang he tries to ignore.

"*Mike*," Lucas whispers.

"What?"

"Have you asked her yet?"

"Asked her *what*?"

"Jesus, Mike," Dustin whispers. It's a lot louder than Lucas's whisper.

"If there was something I was going to ask her, then *no*, have you *seen* me ask her? You've been *right here* the whole time."

Dustin shrugs. "I thought maybe you asked her during a Vulcan mind-

meld or something."

"Huh?"

"Nothing." The guys return to their X-men comics.

Mike looks toward his other friends. One of them is a friend, and is also *more* than a friend. He hopes so, anyway. And he *is* going to ask her to the Snow Ball. He promised last year, and he means to keep his promise. He's just not sure how to actually *do* it. It was easy last year, but so much has happened since then. It somehow makes it more difficult to accomplish this time. Every time he gets close, something stops him. And every time he's thwarted, it makes it a little harder. But there's still plenty of time, so he just enjoys watching her.

She gingerly takes a snow globe from Will. She isn't sure what it is, but she likes it. It's a clear glass ball with a blue base, and she can see inside. There are little figures inside, in front of a snowman. She knows what snowmen are, because she's made them with her friends. Will takes it from her gently, and then gives it a shake. Hands it back to her. She smiles. Fat white snowflakes are falling around the figures in the glass.

"Pretty," she says softly. Will grins at her and she grins back. A *real* grin, not the tiny smile that's her usual expression of happiness.

"Here, I have more. Want to see?" She nods. Accepts the next one, and shakes it gently. She looks utterly enchanted with it, even though this one is just a cheap souvenir from their last real vacation. Mike watches them both. The pang is a little worse now, because Will is also gazing at her, smiling at her delight.

They're *all* watching her, all of the kids, anyway. Dustin suddenly remembers what he told them, over a year ago. The day they tried to find the gate, and Eleven ran away. *If there's the presence of a more powerful magnetic field, the needle deflects to that power.* And that's what they do with Eleven. Not just Mike. It's what they *all* do. Somehow she's become the driving force of their group. The center. Even when she was gone, she was still the center of it somehow. The thought makes him smile.

Mike is smiling, too, because he's had an idea. He knows how to ask her now.

"OKAY. Let's try this again," Hopper yells. His patience is nearly worn thin and he is most definitely no longer having fun.

"If you say anything about cocoa again, I'll hit you," Will whispers to Dustin.

"Will. Lights. Everyone. *Seats*. SEATS," he snaps. They scurry to their places on the sofa. Will hits the lights, and this time, it works. The tree is aglow with twinkly multicolored lights. Eleven gazes at them happily. The lights reflect around the room, casting blue and red and green shadows everywhere. She can see them on Mike's face, because he's watching to see her reaction.

"What do you think?" Will asks her from her other side.

"*Pretty*," she says again. Her voice sounds a little awed, and it's the only word she can use. It's the only word she has right now. Hopper sees her happiness, her *wistfulness*, as she gazes at the lights. He makes a mental note to buy a tree for the house. He hasn't decorated for Christmas in years, because there wasn't any point to it without family. He has a family now.

"Hey, El," Will says suddenly, and she looks away from the tree.

"Yes?"

"Has anyone ever told you about Santa Claus?"

Dustin and Lucas splutter with laughter.

"Who?"

"Santa Claus," Dustin takes over. "He's a really fat guy in a red suit."

"Oh...kay," Eleven responds slowly.

"Basically, he's just this really fat guy who squeezes down your chimney every year on Christmas Eve," Dustin explains. Will rolls his eyes.

"But...*why*?" She asks suspiciously.

"To raid the cabinets and eat all of your cookies," Lucas says, and Eleven is horrified. Mike hits him.

"Shut up, Lucas." He turns to Eleven. She still looks horrified and he can't help but laugh. "It's just a story. He's not real."

"He's not?"

"No. He's kind of like, um, a myth. Remember when we looked at that book of Greek myths?" She nods. "Kind of like that. Anyway, the story is that he and his elves-helpers-make all of these toys all year long, and then if you're good-"

"If you really suck up to your parents," Lucas interjects.

"If you're good, he'll leave a gift for you."

"He doesn't eat cookies?" Eleven just wants to be sure.

"Well, yeah. He does. In the story, I mean. But he doesn't, like, just steal food from your house. You leave a couple of cookies out on Christmas Eve for him before bed-"

"To sweeten the deal and make sure he leaves you something good," Dustin interrupts. "He's really fat, because he eats cookies from, like, every house in the world all in one night. That's a shit-ton of calories." Joyce has turned around, facing the tree, to attempt to hide her laughter. It's not working very well.

"It probably just tides him over until the next year," Lucas laughs.

"Anyway, that's pretty much it. Oh, and he flies on a sleigh pulled by reindeer. Magic reindeer." Eleven looks confused again and he looks to Will for help.

"We have the movie," he says. He's already halfway off the couch.

"It's getting kind of late," Joyce reminds him gently. "Maybe tomorrow?"

"We're already sleeping over here, anyway," Dustin points out. "Late night movies are definitely an acceptable sleepover activity."

"That's true, but Eleven and Hopper aren't sleeping over."

"They could," Lucas offers. He glances at Hopper. "Maybe not *you*. I mean, obviously you could, but you don't exactly look like the sleepover type." Without looking at his friend, he elbows him discreetly. *Do not say a word*, the elbow says. *Not one single innuendo*. Dustin remains quiet, although he's a little disappointed.

Joyce looks at Hopper, shrugs. "I don't mind, Hop. It's up to you."

Hopper considers it very carefully. On one hand (the father hand), it sounds like a horrible idea. One pre-teen girl having a sleepover with her four best friends, who all happen to be pre-teen boys. And one of those boys is Mike Wheeler. And he knows *exactly* how they feel about each other. On the other hand, they are kids. And she slept in Mike's basement for a week. And she's never had a sleepover before, and unfortunately she doesn't have any girl friends. Maybe she will someday, but she definitely won't be sleeping over at Max's house. Not with that brother of hers. And Joyce will be here to chaperone. He looks hard at Joyce and she nods quickly. Understands him perfectly.

"Eleven can take the couch, and the boys will be in Will's room." He squints, gazing in that direction. Possibly calculating the steps it would take to get from one of those locations to the other. Sighs. Remembers they are still children.

"It's up to you, kid." Eleven nods immediately. Enthusiastically. Will's already turning the movie on.

"Sorry about the stains," Mike says to her quietly.

"Stains?"

"Yeah. I spilled cocoa on the couch. I hope it's dry by now."

"It's okay," she says. She doesn't mind. They smile at each other and settle in. She puts her head back on his shoulder and Hopper halts at the door. Raises his eyebrows to Joyce. His meaning is obvious. She

nods, a little irritably. Hopper overreacts and she knows it.

Mike rests his head gently against hers. He's happy she's here. That she *will* be here. That she will be close by all night. It makes the panicked feeling he sometimes gets a little better. He doesn't even think about it, not in the way that Hopper worries about. It's just natural for her to be close, like when she was living in her fort in his basement.

Nearly a week later, Eleven realizes that not everyone will actually be at the party. Not everyone from her list. That makes it a lot more difficult to distribute her presents. Mike's parents won't be there. Mr. Clarke won't be there. Only the people who know about the Upside Down will be there. Except for Steve, and Max. Max is out of town, because of *divorce*. And she doesn't have a gift for Max, anyway. Max is not on her list yet, although someday, she might be. Steve isn't coming, although he was invited. He isn't coming because he's *broken up* with Nancy. Eleven knows what *broken up* is. *Broken up* means Nancy is with Jonathan now.

Mike comes up with an easy solution. She will give her gifts to the people at the party. The people who will actually be in attendance. She will give her *other* gifts now. She wanted to distribute her gifts alone, in *private*, but Mike gently dissuades her. Hopper won't go for it, for one thing. And Mr. Clarke may not remember her, because he only met her once. She agrees, because that's true. And she had her wig then, so she looked different. Her hair was light.

"Maybe I should have my wig," She says worriedly, but Mike shakes his head.

"Nah. You don't need it." Gently.

"But I had different hair then," she says, and he reconsiders. The whole explanation for the gift-giving rests on Mr. Clarke recognizing her as Mike's cousin. And she *did* have blonde hair that day. Straight blonde hair. Her hair is dark and a little curly now.

"You're right, he might recognize you better with the wig," he says, and she smiles. Then she remembers.

"I...I lost it. The day with the bullies," she says, but he's already halfway in her fort, which is still intact. He pulls out the wig, triumphantly.

"Here," he says, and hands it to her.

"How...?"

"Oh. I found it. When we were looking for you. I...I kept it."

She gives him a little smile and he turns pink, but she doesn't notice. She's trying to fit her hair under the wig. It's a lot harder now than it was last year, because her hair is longer. Mike helps her tuck it in with Nancy's bobby pins. A few minutes later, she is blonde again and they're on their way. Mike considered calling ahead to warn him but decided against it. Mr. Clarke is a pretty awesome guy, and Mike thinks he'll be able to handle any awkwardness.

He takes her over there in the afternoon. "I'll be right beside you, okay?" He asks, because she's a little nervous now. This is her first gift. *Ever*. She nods, but doesn't speak. She can't, because she's losing her words again.

"It's okay. Just remember, you're Eleanor. My cousin." He makes a face. He heartily wishes they had invented a different persona for her, but oh well. It's too late now.

"From Sweden," she enunciates, and he smiles.

"Yeah. Sweden." He rings the doorbell, hoping Mr. Clarke is home. Maybe he should have called after all, he never thought about it, but Mr. Clarke could be out of town. With family. Anywhere but here. The door opens immediately, however, and he relaxes.

"Mike!" Mr. Clarke sounds surprised, but also pleased. That's just the kind of teacher he is, and one of the many reasons he's Mike's favorite, hands-down.

"Hi, Mr. Clarke," Mike says, and waits. He waits for Eleven to say something, but when she doesn't, he steps in smoothly for her. "This is Eleanor. My cousin," he says, trying not to grimace. "Do you remember her?"

Mr. Clarke considers her for a moment, a little perplexed, then smiles. It transforms his whole face, and she sees his goodness again. "Yes. Of course I do. From Sweden, correct? We met on the day of... the day of the assembly for Will. How are you?" He asks her.

"Good," she says in a soft voice. A pause. "How are you?"

"I'm great, thank you, Eleanor. What can I do for you guys?"

Eleven doesn't say anything, so Mike continues.

"Well. Eleanor is moving here," he starts, and then stops in horror. He's just thought of something. She's technically Hopper's daughter now. And everyone knows Hopper. And they know he doesn't have any family in *Sweden*. Oh well, it's too late to do anything about it. They'll have to figure that one out later, if she ever attends school with them.

"Um. Anyway, she's going to be moving here, and going to school when she's settled in. Right now she's home-schooled. Anyway. Um. You were the first person she met in Hawkins that day, and you were nice to her and everything, and she's heard a lot about you from me. And the guys. So she knows that you're the best teacher at school." Mr. Clarke smiles at this.

Mike doesn't have to specify who *the guys* are, because Mr. Clarke already knows. It's another example of his awesomeness.

"And people in Sweden are really welcoming and everything," he adds inanely. He feels like he's turning pink again, because the words coming out of his mouth are just getting lamer and lamer. "So she got you a Christmas gift."

Lame story or not, Mike can see that Mr. Clarke totally buys it. More than that, Mr. Clarke is touched. He's actually wiping his eyes, so Mike takes that as an encouraging sign.

"That is so *kind* of you, Eleanor. Thank you so much. And welcome to Hawkins. I can't wait to have you in my class," he says, beaming at her. She smiles at him uncertainly. She has no idea why he's crying, but Mike isn't making a bad face, so it must be okay. She knows that

some tears are happy, because she had them when she saw Mike again. And *he* had them, when he saw her.

"Thank you." She hands him a neatly wrapped gift. It's neatly wrapped, because after an hour of Hopper and Eleven trying to wrap it the normal way (which ended in yelling, because neither of them can wrap that way, and Hopper had papercuts all over his fingers) she wrapped it telekinetically. It looks very pretty, and she's immensely pleased with it. She hopes he likes it.

"Should I open it now?" Mr. Clarke asks her. "Actually, would you both like to come in?" Eleven starts to nod. She would like to see inside Mr. Clarke's house, but Mike shakes his head.

"Sorry, Mr. Clarke, but we have to get going soon."

"Oh. That's all right, maybe next time. Would you like me to open it now, or wait until Christmas?"

She looks at Mike. Mike smiles at her and shrugs. *It's up to you*, the shrug says.

"You can open it now," she says quietly.

He gently loosens one corner of the present. "That's beautiful wrapping, Eleanor. Did you wrap it yourself?"

"Yes," she says. She looks so pleased with herself, which is highly unusual, and it's a tip-off. Mike knows exactly how she wrapped it. He stifles a laugh.

He finally gets the wrapping off, without ripping it at all. Mike doesn't understand why old people do that. Are they really going to use that paper again, or what? And *how*, unless they put a present the exact same size inside it? He guesses he'll figure it out someday, when he's as old as Mr. Clarke.

Mr. Clarke gazes down at the book in surprise. It's a lush edition of *Manual of the Planes*, an advanced Dungeons and Dragons handbook. He glances at both of them curiously.

"A little bird told her you knew about D&D," Mike says. "And the Vale

of Shadows." Mr. Clarke laughs. He looks utterly delighted. He remembers it very well, the day of Will's funeral. The explanation of the flea and the acrobat. They were so interested in learning about that. He runs his index finger gently over the book.

"Thank you so much, Eleanor. That's a very thoughtful gift. I love it," he tells her, and her face lights up. She's an adorable little girl, and her cousin is obviously very fond of her. They wave goodbye to him, turning down his offer of cookies because Mike says they have to go. Mike takes her hand without thinking, to lead her down the steps, and then drops it quickly as if her hand is too hot to hold. *Shit.* He glances back to see if Mr. Clarke noticed, but the door is closed.

Scott Clarke settles into his green wingback and opens the book. He hasn't played Dungeons and Dragons in ages, not since his friends all married and started families. He's missed it, to be honest. He's missed the time with them. As he gently pages through it, he notices a sheet of paper wedged halfway through the book. He lightly ruffles the pages to turn back to it, and then removes it. Maybe it's a receipt. But no, it's hand-written, with carefully printed writing.

For Mr. Clarke, so you can have fun with your friends. And thank you for teaching mine.

-El

Scott smiles down at the note. He's lucky. Some of his colleagues hate their students, but he never has. The kids in his class-and their cousins-are amazing.

Steve is the next stop, and it's a few minutes away, so she rides on Mike's bike again. When they arrive, Mike parks it in the driveway. "You can take your wig off now," he says. She makes no move to do so. She still likes her wig, and her light hair is nice. She thinks that Mike likes it, too, because he told her she was pretty when she wore it last time. Although he told her she was pretty without it as well. He sees her hesitate. "Steve's never seen you with the wig, so he might not recognize you," he points out, and she takes it off. He helps her with the bobby pins.

She starts for the door, and he follows.

"No," she says, and he stops. Sighs.

"You *sure* it's not his hair?" She smiles and shakes her head.

"Okay." He shrugs off his backpack, hands it to her. He's feeling a little trepidation, because this gift is a little more problematic than a book. A hell of a lot more problematic than a book. Maybe he should have called him to warn him. "Remember, give it to him inside. And *not* if anyone else is around, okay?" She nods, and heads for the door. He leans against Steve's car to wait.

Steve's watching TV in the living room when the bell rings. His parents are in the kitchen, eating lunch.

"Steve. Get that, would you?" His mom asks. Steve sighs and mutes the TV. He heads for the door. He can't see who it is, because they don't have a glass partition. He opens it and gapes in utter astonishment. It's a little girl, with short dark hair and dark eyes. He recognizes her immediately. It's Eleven, the girl with the powers. He's never spoken to her before, although he was present the night she returned to close the gate.

"Oh. Uh, hi."

She stands there quietly, just looking at him. She's considering his hair, because Mike has mentioned it many times. And he always seems upset when he does. It's nice hair, but *any* hair is nice hair. It's not as nice as Mike's.

"Uh..." He has no idea what to say or do, but a terrifying thought comes to him. He can only think of one reason she'd be *here*, of all places. *Shit*.

"Is there-is something *wrong*? *Again*?" He asks, trying to speak in a kind of half-assed code so his parents won't understand if they overhear.

"Can I come in?" She finally asks, and now he really starts to panic. This does not sound good. And she looks so solemn. *Shit. Shit. Shit*. He's not ready for this, not yet. Not *ever*, actually. Wordlessly, he holds the door open for her. His father peeks around from the

kitchen.

"Oh, hi there," he says.

"Hi," she says.

There's an extremely awkward moment between them all. Eleven is looking at him gravely. Steve frantically wracks his brains for any plausible reason a 12 year old girl would be in his house.

"Dad. Mom," he says, because *she's* moved into the living room as well. "This is..." *Shit*. He can't exactly call her *Eleven*, can he?

"Eleanor," she supplies, and Steve shoots her a quick, relieved grin.

"Eleanor. She's...um." *A very weird little girl? A superhero? Here to tell me the world is ending? Again?* "She's...Nancy and Mike's..."

"Cousin."

"Yeah, cousin," he quickly repeats, and then sighs. "She's here, um. She's here to help me with Nancy's gift," he says lamely. His parents look puzzled but also utterly delighted. They liked Nancy a lot. They think she was a good influence because his grades had started to improve.

"*Nancy!* I thought you broke up?" His mom asks.

"We're getting back together!" He exclaims wildly. *Shit*. He can feel sweat forming on his forehead. "I mean, I think we are. That's why El-" *Shit*. "*Eleanor* is helping with her gift. They're really close."

"That's wonderful, honey," his mom says. Steve can tell they're practically shitting themselves with joy. He manages to keep a smile pasted on his face.

"Nice to meet you, Eleanor," his dad says, and heads back to his lunch. His mother hovers, clearly hoping to catch a glimpse of the present that will win Nancy back. Steve motions toward the kitchen, and she smiles and waves before leaving him the fuck alone. *Finally*.

"Come on," Steve says quietly, and runs up the stairs without even

looking to see if she's coming, too. Eleven does follow, but more serenely. She's looking around with interest. His house is bigger than Hopper's house. Maybe because he has more people living with him?

Steve shuts the door in a hurry, being careful not to let it slam. The face he turns toward Eleven is urgent.

"What? What is it?"

He looks so upset that she gets confused and doesn't answer. What is wrong with him? Why is he upset? He is not supposed to be upset. She hasn't planned for this. She looks around the room for inspiration. He has a lot of stuff. And *a lot* of hair stuff. She can see it near the mirror on his dresser. She wonders if she will ever need that much stuff for her own hair. Steve takes her prolonged silence as a bad omen. Clearly she is so traumatized by whatever's happened that she can't speak. He fervently hopes that no one's dead.

"Nancy?" He asks immediately, because he can't help it. She looks blank, so he amends, "Did something happen? Is someone hurt?"

She doesn't respond, not with words anyway. She carefully takes the backpack off and unzips it. Steve swallows. Please God, not another Demogorgon. Demodog. Whatever the hell they're called. She seems to unzip it very slowly. She reaches her hand in. Pulls out the bat. The bat with the nails embedded in it. Although the last time he saw it, most of the nails had been ripped out, or bent. This one has fresh nails, embedded deeply within it. It's ready for use. She holds it up somberly and Steve's mouth goes completely dry. He stares at her.

"*Holy shit*," he breathes, and she is happy. *He must really like it.*

Then she notices the way his eyes are bulging and the sweat beading on his forehead, and it puzzles her. *He* doesn't look happy. Not like he just opened a Christmas gift. He looks scared. *Very* scared.

He *is* scared. *More than scared.* He's terrified. He feels like he's about to shit himself, to be honest. He asks her his worst fear. It's his worst fucking fear, and it *must* be true. Why else would she be *here*? Is he the only one left? "Is the gate open again? Are there monsters?"

She looks so surprised that he relaxes slightly. That's not it, evidently.

"No," she says finally. "Everything is okay."

He heaves a sigh and sits heavily on the bed, because his legs feel a little weak once the rush of adrenalin has left him. He cradles his head in his hands and just breathes. She waits quietly in front of him until he's ready to look at her again.

"If everything is okay, then why the hell did you bring *that*?" He asks. He tries not to snap, because he knows all about her. But Jesus, she scared the *shit* out of him. Metaphorically and almost literally.

"It's for you." She hands it to him, and reflexively, he takes it.

"But *why*? If there aren't any monsters?"

She says the words carefully, the words that Mike taught her. "Merry Christmas."

Steve just gapes. He stares at the bat. It's a *murder weapon*. A recently repaired and refurbished murder weapon. One intended for monsters from *another fucking dimension*. One that he has used before, on monsters from another dimension. And also, apparently, it's a *Christmas gift*. From a very weird little girl with telekinetic powers. If she were anyone else, he would ask if she were fucking kidding. Or he'd get angry. But he can't do that, because he knows all about her. He knows that she doesn't understand a lot of things. So he tries to be kind.

"Uh." That's the best he can do. He's run out of words, just like Eleven sometimes does. She sees it happen, and understands that *he* doesn't understand. That's okay. She will tell him. She takes a little breath, because she will have to use her words. A lot of words. All at once. And that is still difficult for her. The sentences come out of her mouth with odd little pauses in between, but he doesn't notice, because he's listening keenly. He has to, because she has an intense look on her face, as if the words are very important to her.

"It's for you. Because you were brave. You were brave many times. You were a *hero*." She uses Dustin's word. "You helped Nancy and

Jonathan last year. The demogorgon. Because you were brave this year. You protected my friends. When I wasn't here. When I couldn't. And you would have protected them again. You would have tried. If I hadn't come back."

She pauses, and he thinks she's finished, but after a moment, she resumes. "In case you need it. If you need to be brave again. If you need to protect your friends."

She's finished now. She waits for him to speak. He hefts the bat with one hand and looks at it. He didn't *feel* like a hero, when he was using it. He was just terrified. But he feels a little like one now.

"Thanks...Eleven." He says it in a much more gentle tone than his usual one. She smiles at him and he smiles back. He can't help it. He also can't help the next words out of his mouth. "Will I...need it? Again?" *Will there be more monsters?*

She smiles a little but doesn't answer, and he's okay with that. For now, everything is calm. And if it isn't, some day in the future, he will be okay. He has the bat.

He stands up and carefully places it in his closet. Where it will be waiting, should he ever need it again. He surprises her-surprises them both-by dropping a gentle kiss on the top of her head. She smiles up at him.

"Let me walk you out." He pauses at the door before opening it. "How did you get here? Do you need a ride?"

"Mike," she says simply, as if that answers the question.

"Ah. Okay." He supposes it does.

Steve waves to them both as Eleven climbs onto the bike. Mike waves back until Steve closes the door.

"How did it go?"

"Good."

"Did he...like it?" Mike's torn between hilarity and gravity. He hopes

Steve wasn't an ass about it, but Dustin seems to like him a lot now. Maybe he isn't an ass anymore. He does wish he could have seen the look on Steve's face, though.

"Yes."

"Yeah? That's good. He told you that?" Thank God, Dustin was right. Steve can be nice. He starts to pedal down Steve's driveway and onto the street.

"Yes. He kissed me."

Mike's not sure what's happened. One minute they were firmly on the bike, the next, they are tipping over. He must have hit something. He prepares for a hard landing, but it never happens. They freeze inches away from concrete, then the bike slowly rights itself. Mike takes a deep breath and looks around. Luckily, no one's outside. And hopefully no one saw from a window. Hopefully, everyone on this fucking street is out of town for Christmas.

"Thanks. Sorry," Mike mutters, then remembers what she said.

"He *kissed* you?" His voice squeaks.

"Yes."

He cranes around to stare at her, feet firmly on the ground. Surely she doesn't mean what he's thinking.

"Um. Where?"

"Here," Eleven says, and touches the top of her head. He breathes a sigh of relief, ignoring her curious look.

"Not like you," she tells him quietly, and he turns red. He doesn't have to see it. He can feel it.

"Oh. Um. Good." Maybe now is the time to ask her to the Snow Ball. He's had an idea planned, but what the hell. The timing is right.

"Um. About that," he begins, but gets no further. A car honks at them impatiently. They are blocking the lane. Mike grumbles and pedals

out of the way. *Or not.* Maybe he'll stick to the plan after all.

The next gifts are easy, because they are delivered to the same place. Mike's house. The gifts are for his parents. This time, Mike has delivered a warning. He has to, because they know Eleven. Sort of. They know he hid her for a week. They know she disappeared for a year. They know she's back, which is kind of obvious, since she is in their house several times a week, at least. They know she was experimented on in a top secret project, and that the government tried to get her back. They know she's a little...different, because she grew up in a lab and wasn't socialized. They know her limitations. And that is all they know, so he has warned them.

When Eleven presents Karen with another perfectly wrapped gift, Karen is ready. It's kind of obvious what it is, or at least what category it belongs to, because Mike just pulled it out of the freezer. It's two boxes of Eggos. Eleven explains it's because she ate her Eggos when she lived in the basement. Eleven thanks her for letting her have them. Karen smiles at Mike over the top of Eleven's head and then thanks her. Kisses her on the head, just like Steve did. Eleven is proud of her gift, because she loves Eggos. And she would have liked to keep them for herself. That makes it a very good gift, since she gave them away instead.

The gift for Mike's dad is a little less unusual. It's a thick, warm blanket. It's nice. And a small pillow. But she still feels the need to explain it. She tells him she knows he sleeps in the chair, because Mike told her. She tried it out, and it was very comfortable. But she noticed, that day over a year ago, that it didn't have a blanket and pillow. She doesn't know why he didn't already have them, but since he didn't, she got them for him.

"It makes it more like a bed," she explains to him. He shoots Karen an amused grin and Karen actually returns it. The La-Z-Boy is usually a sore subject between them. He thanks her and spreads the blanket over his lap. Tucks the pillow behind his head. Reclines. Appears to nap. She waits, but he doesn't kiss her on the forehead. Karen does it again instead.

Eleven has no concept of equality when it comes to gifts. No concept of the difference in expense. She doesn't think twice about giving

Mike's mom a cheaper gift, and Mike's dad a more expensive one, even though she actually likes Mike's mom more. The price of the gift doesn't matter. It just has to be a thoughtful gift. A good gift.

Nancy comes downstairs for some water and tries not to laugh at the presents. She talks to Eleven for a few minutes before leaving for Jonathan's, because she genuinely likes her. She likes Eleven *a lot*. The girl is a badass, and Mike is lucky to know her. She's not sure if Eleven bought *her* a gift or not, but if she did, Nancy can't wait to find out what she ended up with.

Eleven is disappointed, because she still needs to give Nancy her gift. It only seems fair to give it to her now, because she just gave her presents to their mom and dad. She wants to wait until the party, but Mike tells her she can leave it in Nancy's room. That way, Nancy will see it as soon as she gets home. That sounds okay to Eleven, but she's glad she included a note. She leaves the box on Nancy's bed.

When Nancy returns, she sees a large box wrapped in red paper. She can guess who it's from. She smiles a little and hefts it. It's surprisingly light, considering it's a large box. She starts to unwrap it curiously. Opens the box. Stares. Tries not to laugh, but she can't help it. She tries to keep it as quiet as possible, so Mike won't hear and get pissed off. It's not a mean laugh, just a good-natured one, but Mike might not be able to tell the difference. Not when it comes to Eleven. She reaches in with both hands and takes out the present. It's a blonde wig. It's still on the head. There's a note at the bottom of the box, and she sets the head on the floor before reaching in to grab it.

For Nancy. Thank you for the wig. I'm sorry you didn't get it back. Here is another one, even though your hair is prettier. You can have the head, too, because you didn't have one.

Eleven

Nancy giggles helplessly. It's sweet. It's weird, but sweet. When the giggles have tapered off, she sets it up on her dresser. She picks up her phone to let Jonathan know she made it home safely, but she can still see it out of the corner of her eye. She giggles every time she can't resist looking at it.

The second Mike realizes his sister is home, he bolts for the stairs. Nancy's on the phone and hears him thundering in the hallway. He knocks frantically at her door, but doesn't open it. He needs to stay on her good side, and she really hates when he barges in. He gives her approximately less than a second to respond before he loses patience.

"Nancy!"

Nancy sighs.

"What's wrong?" Jonathan asks from the other end.

"Not you; my little brother," she says. "Hang on."

"What, Mike? Can't it wait? I'm on the phone!"

"No! I need your help." The desperation in his voice scares her, and she unceremoniously hangs up the phone. Jonathan will understand. He has a brother, too. She's already across the room and opening the door.

"What's wrong?" She pulls him into her room. He looks pale and clammy. She hopes that there aren't any monsters, but doesn't hold her breath. There are probably monsters.

"I need your help."

"So I gathered."

Mike glares at her and she shrugs. "What kind of help did you need?"

"I need to get El a Christmas gift."

Nancy waits, but apparently that's it. "Didn't you already get her something?"

"Yes! But I need another one."

She smiles a little but tries to hide it. He's just so fucking adorable right now. He's practically bouncing on the balls of his feet and just generally freaking out. It's just too cute.

"I don't really think you need to get her *two* gifts, Mike," she tells him gently.

"I do!" He sounds emphatic. "I'm giving her the real gift on Christmas day, but I need another one for the party tomorrow."

"Can't you just give her your gift early?" She starts, but the glower on his face shuts her up. "Okay. Well, what's the problem, then?"

"I don't have any money," he says, looking at her with a pleading expression she recognizes all too well. It's his puppy dog expression, and its sole purpose is to collect money. Usually from her. She sighs.

"Mike. It's not my fault you spent your allowance for the next three years already. Just get her a box of *Eggos*. I promise you, she'll be thrilled."

Mike rolls his eyes. "She does eat other things besides *Eggos*, you know."

"Still. I think it will do in a pinch."

Mike sighs. He's clearly struggling to say (or not say) something important. He looks up at her warily, as if weighing his options. He cuts his eyes to the door. She glances at it, too, then back at him. He raises his eyebrows meaningfully, and she gets it. She shuts the door.

"What's up?"

He's pacing back and forth, and it's making her a little curious and a lot annoyed. She really needs to call Jonathan back, since apparently there aren't any monsters. She starts to glare at him and he flops onto the bed. He's careful not to look at her while he speaks.

"Shut up," he says, and she looks at him in surprise and irritation.

"I didn't say anything!"

"I know. I'm being preemptive."

She stifles a laugh. "Okay. I won't say a word."

"Okay. So. Um, the Snow Ball is coming up."

He doesn't say anything else, and she promised to keep her mouth shut, so this conversation can take all freaking day at this rate. Nancy settles for nodding and gesturing with one hand. Communicating without opening her lips, which is apparently verboten. He still doesn't say anything, but he finally looks up at her. Maybe it's the expression in his eyes, or maybe she's just been spending so much more time with him, but she understands. A little, anyway.

She decides to break her vow of silence. "And...you want to ask Eleven?"

Mike nods.

"Okay. What's stopping you?"

He doesn't want to go into that, though, because the short answer is that a million things are stopping him. Or *were* stopping him, because he finally has a plan and he thinks he can actually go through with it now.

"I want it to be special. When I ask."

Her eyes soften. So freaking adorable.

"Mike," she says, careful to use her gentlest, most big sisterly voice. "I'm sure it will be. Because *you're* asking her."

Mike runs a hand through his hair absently.

"I don't know, maybe. But. I don't know if you know this, but I asked her. Last year."

"You did?" Nancy wasn't expecting that, although of course she knew he liked her then, too. Everyone did.

"Yeah. And...we promised. I promised that we could go. And then... you know. Right after. She disappeared. Like, less than ten minutes later."

Nancy is aghast. "I'm so sorry, Mike. But she's back now. And you can

go this year."

"I know. But, I just want it to be special. When I ask her. To make up for it."

"Mike, that wasn't your fault."

"I know. But it was still horrible. I want to make it special so I can kind of, you know..."

"Forget about last year?"

"Yeah."

He looks so dejected, Nancy notices. His shoulders are slumped and his hair is hanging in his face. She wants to hug him, but refrains.

"What did you have in mind?"

"I want to give her a gift. And then I'll ask her."

She's tempted to laugh again, at the idea of bribing someone into a date with a gift, but she knows it's not what he means.

"*Please*, Nancy," he asks.

She hesitates, and he can see her hesitation. "I'll pay you back!"

"You already owe me money."

"Yeah, and I'll pay that back, too."

She makes him wait for it, because even though she's trying to be a good sister lately, she's still a big sister. And that means a certain amount of suffering is required.

"I'll cover for you, the next time you sneak out to see *Jonathan*," Mike says. It's almost a snide voice, because, even though he's trying to be a good brother lately, he's still a little brother. And that means a certain amount of suffering is required.

"Okay. Let's go."

"Go? You don't have to go. Just give me the money."

"No, no no. I want to see this *special gift*," she teases, but she smiles at him. He smiles back.

"Now?"

"Why not?" Nancy asks. She only hopes she has enough money. Mike is a weird little kid, after all, and he could have his eye on something that costs the moon. Half an hour later, her fears are ungrounded. It doesn't cost the moon. It's not very expensive at all, or at least, not enough that she wants to murder him over it. And it's gorgeous.

"How did you find it?" She asks, marveling over it. Mike looks pleased with her reaction.

"Will was shopping for his mom, and I just ran into it. I thought it was perfect," and he sounds so enthused that he turns pink. Nancy doesn't tease him, though. It *is* perfect, and she tells him so. She's still surprised by it, by Mike's feelings toward Eleven. Nancy's pretty sure that Mike's put more thought and effort into this romantic gesture for Eleven than her parents have ever shown each other. It's a little (or a lot) weird, considering his age, but it's also endearing. She's happy for him.

"Do you want me to gift wrap that for you, sweetie?" The cashier asks him. Mike manages not to give her a sour look, although he hates the endearment from a perfect stranger. It makes him feel approximately 5 years old.

"No. Thank you. I'll wrap it."

He takes the bag from her and Nancy smiles at the cautious way he holds it.

"Since when do you know how to wrap? You usually just, like, drape some wrapping paper over your gifts on Christmas Eve and stick them under the tree," Nancy laughs. Mike doesn't elbow her, because she *was* actually a decent human being for a change and loaned him the money.

"It can't be that hard," he says, shrugging. "I just never cared before."

Nancy gives him a sappy look and he glares at her. "Shut up."

Later that evening, he runs into trouble. As Nancy expected. When he thunders up the stairs, she's ready. Mike throws the door open (forgetting to knock this time, because he already spent her money earlier, and it's not like she can get it back now) and sees Nancy sitting cross-legged on the floor. There are three rolls of wrapping paper beside her. A roll of tape and a pair of scissors. He stops and she smiles smugly.

"I thought you'd need help," she coos, and he rolls his eyes.

"I'm going to do it! I just need a little help."

"Sit." Mike sits.

Nancy rolls the paper to him. "Which one? None of them are very good, but it's all we had left."

He considers them carefully. One is red with puppies, and he discards that. She's not a dog person. One is the cheap gold stuff that tears whenever you try to cut it, so he tosses that one, too. That only leaves the blue with snowflakes, so that's what he hands her.

"Which part were *you* going to do, exactly?" She asks, as she unrolls it. He grumbles and takes the box out of the bag, placing it in the center of the square she's cut. He looks down at it happily. The box is white, with a picture of the snow globe inside embossed on the front. He knows she'll love it. And it's perfect, both because it's a snow globe, and because of what it represents. This globe has two figures, dancing together in a park. It's the right way to ask her, and he doesn't even care how cheesy it is, because it's perfect.

Eleven has the perfect gift, too. She just knows it is. It's the best gift of all of her gifts, and she's glad, because Mike is at the top of her list. That means he needs the best gift. Hopper's helping her carry her presents, and a few of his own. They are getting out of his station wagon, and it's snowing. She thought she hated snow, last year, because it was so cold. Even when she took the man's coat, she was so cold. But she likes it this year. She understands that snow is something that's important for Christmas. And although it's cold, she's

also warm. She has her warm clothes on, and soon she'll be inside with her friends. She will be with them, and the snow will be outside, and that makes her happy. Will's house is decorated with lights, and they make the snow look even nicer. She doesn't notice how run-down his house is. It's just a home. It's the house where three people from her list live, and that makes it pretty. That makes it *more* than pretty.

She starts to knock on the door, but it opens while her hand is still outstretched. It startles her into a rare laugh.

"Hi, El! Hi, Hopper. Mr. Hopper," Will adds, and Hopper smiles at him.

"Hopper's fine, Will."

"Hop!" Dustin screeches happily as they enter. He's sitting on the couch, and holding a box with a picture of a house on it.

"I said Hopper was fine. To Will. Hop is not fine." Hopper speaks absently, and without any heat, because he's dumping presents under the tree. Eleven copies him, but places hers more gently. Hopper goes in search of Joyce, since only the kids are in the living room.

"Hey, El," Lucas and Dustin call, and she joins them on the couch. Dustin is opening the box and shaking its contents onto the coffee table.

"What is that?" Eleven asks.

"Gingerbread houses!" Will says.

"Have you ever done one before?" Lucas asks, and Dustin rolls his eyes.

"Of course she hasn't, idiot." He turns to Eleven and says kindly, "You build these houses out of candy and cookies, basically. And they're supposed to look nice, although they always look like shit."

"Mine never does," Will reminds him in a smug voice.

"Yeah, yeah. Not everyone is an artist like you, Byers." He turns to

Eleven again. "And then, once you're done building it, you can eat it. Or not. Want to try?"

Eleven looks around the room curiously. Not everyone is here, she's noticed. Does that mean they should wait?

"You can go ahead and get started," Lucas says. "We're all going to do one, then the old people can judge them."

"Thanks, Lucas," Joyce says, and Lucas shrugs.

"Well, you are. Older than us, anyway."

"So true," she says, and opens a bottle of wine. She pours Hopper a glass, and then turns on the Christmas music before Will can even ask.

"So. Who else is coming to this party?" Hopper asks, because so far, it's just them. And the kids.

"Just us," she says.

He raises his eyebrows. "Kind of a small party, isn't it?"

She smiles. "The people who matter are here," and Hopper knows what she means. And it's true. They are all here (or will be here shortly). The survivors, or at least the ones that could make it. The people who know exactly what's been going on, and have formed a bond because of it. Because they all fought together, even if they weren't physically side by side. He raises his glass to Joyce and smiles back.

Lucas looks up from gluing a gumdrop onto his roof. He peeks at Dustin's house, because Dustin is usually the competition. Will always wins. Even when Joyce tries to be impartial, it's obvious to all of them that he is the clear winner, year after year. That leaves Mike and Lucas and Dustin, and Mike blows. He's great at writing, but he sucks at other forms of art. If you can count gingerbread houses as art. Lucas isn't too sure about that, but that's not the point. The point is, Dustin is the one to watch.

Dustin's house looks okay, but Lucas doesn't like the color scheme.

The green gumdrops look best in *front* of the house, as a fence. Or shrubs. Like on his own house, Lucas thinks, giving his house a loving gaze. Dustin's plastered them all over the roof, and it looks like shit. To him, anyway. Lucas starts to reach for another gumdrop, and then remembers. Their party has expanded. And Eleven is an unknown. He has no idea how artistic or not she is, he only knows that she could probably assemble the stupid thing in seconds with her mind.

He turns his head to make sure she's not cheating (although *she* won't think of it that way, she's only using her natural ability, the same as Will uses his natural artistic ability) and sees that he has nothing to worry about. Eleven's house is in shambles. In fact, he doesn't think she's even attempted to assemble it. She's nonchalantly eating a window.

"No!" And she looks over in surprise. "No, no no. You don't eat them yet! You *build* them first. *Then* they get judged. *Then* you can eat them."

She takes another bite of window and he throws up his hands in exasperation. He looks to Dustin for his support. Dustin is no help whatsoever, because Dustin is eating a window, too. Lucas stares at him until Dustin can feel the weight of his gaze. He looks up to see his friend glowering at him. He smiles and holds up the remainder of the window in a little toast to Lucas. Takes another bite.

Will gets the giggles. He can't help it. They are just too funny, and Lucas looks like he's taken this whole thing way too seriously, as if it's a matter of life and death and they've chosen death because they've eaten part of their houses. He snickers helplessly until he starts to hiccup.

"What are *you* laughing at, Byers?" Lucas snaps. Will only laughs harder. He can't seem to stop. His hand jerks away from his careful decorating and accidentally hits the house. The ceiling comes down and lands in the gingerbread living room. Part of it breaks off and flattens the shrubs in his yard.

"Shit," Will says, then starts giggling again. This time his friends join him. They barely notice Jonathan snapping their picture. Will's knees knock against the bottom of the table and he watches in hysterics as

his tray slowly slides off and onto the floor.

They regard the shambles with interest.

"Looks like Will is disqualified," Lucas says jubilantly. Will leans his head against Eleven's shoulder because his neck can't support it anymore. He wheezes in between giggles.

Joyce smiles at them all, then at Hopper. It's the first time she's seen Will so at ease, so like he used to be, since before he was taken. She catches Jonathan's eye as he straightens up with his camera.

"I *know*. The party was a good idea," he tells her, grinning.

They've abandoned their houses for now. They will finish them when they can look at them again without giggling. Will is eyeing the tree so obviously that Joyce laughs.

"Okay. You guys can do your presents now if you want."

The guys seem to hesitate, despite their excitement.

"Maybe we should wait?" Dustin asks.

"Nah, he won't mind," Lucas answers. Will looks at Eleven and she shrugs. He's sure he *will* mind, actually, and *a lot*, but the guys are getting antsy now, and Lucas has already grabbed a present and thrust it at Eleven, so there's not much he can do.

"One at a time, okay?" Joyce asks, and they all groan.

"Why do old people do that?" Lucas mutters.

"So we can take pictures of each gift," Jonathan says, sitting on the floor next to the tree.

"And to, like, make it last longer. Obviously," Dustin adds.

Eleven sits on the floor next to them. Hopper and Joyce move to the couch to watch. Will passes around presents until they each have one.

"You first, El. That's from me," Lucas tells her. She starts to unwrap it,

smiling at the Star Wars paper. Lucas places a hand over hers before she can rip. "Wait! I forgot to tell you. That's not your real present."

"No?"

"No. You get the real one on Christmas day."

She looks baffled, so Will jumps in. "We wanted you to have, like, a regular Christmas day present, so we saved the real ones for then. These are just little gifts, as...placeholders, until then. Okay?"

She nods and smiles.

"You didn't have to get more gifts," she tells them, and Lucas looks around at them pointedly. *Told you*, the look clearly says.

Lucas removes his hand from hers. "Okay, now you can open."

She carefully unwraps it, trying to do it like Mr. Clarke did. It doesn't work very well, but no one seems to care.

"Eggs!" She cries, and grins. A *real* grin. She looks thrilled, as if it's the best gift anyone could ever get. Lucas gives them all another pointed look, but they ignore it.

Jonathan snaps a picture and Will gets a sinking feeling in his chest. They should have waited. She just opened her first gift, *ever*, and they definitely should have waited. He meets Dustin's eyes and Dustin shrugs. *Too late now*, the shrug says.

Lucas starts to unwrap the gift Will handed him, but Eleven levitates it out of his lap, and replaces it with hers, instead. It seems only fair, since she just opened his; that his first present should come from her. Dustin immediately looks away, just in case. He doesn't want to have another laughing fit. Lucas takes a deep breath to prepare himself and unwraps the box.

It's a plain white box, the kind that usually contains clothes. The lamest of all Christmas gifts. He gives it a tentative shake and hears several large things rattle around inside. Obviously not clothes, which doesn't really surprise him. Clothes are just too ordinary to come from Eleven. He lifts the lid. Stares in silence. Dustin leans

discreetly to the right and peers down into the box. Leans away and arranges his face into a somber expression to withhold the laughter. He looks anywhere but at his friends.

Lucas stares in surprise. Inside the box are rocks. Just rocks. Ten large, round rocks. And that's it. He's too surprised and puzzled to laugh, and for that he is grateful. He looks up from the box, back at Eleven, and prepares to thank her for this bizarre choice of gift, but the expression on her face stops him.

She's staring at him solemnly. She's readied herself for the words. "For you. Because you protected me. You protected us. From the Demogorgon. You were brave. You were a *hero*. Because you tried to save me. To save us. And you lost your rocks." She pauses.

It's true. His rocks disappeared that night. They didn't hurt the Demogorgon, didn't stop him from advancing, but they had disappeared. They had been sucked into the Upside Down along with the monster. And Eleven.

"Mike helped me choose them. He said they are perfect for monsters. In case you need them again. If you need to protect us."

Lucas gazes down at them. She's right. They are absolutely perfect for his wrist rocket. It took them an hour last year just to find a *few* that were perfect. And here are ten. That she chose carefully for him. He knows perfectly well that he didn't do a damn thing to the Demogorgon but he sees now that she doesn't feel the same way. In her mind, he's a hero. And he is suddenly overwhelmed.

Eleven's surprised when he suddenly pulls her to him and hugs her as best as he can, considering they're both sitting on the floor. He hugs her as hard as he can.

"I didn't do anything. *You* did," he tells her shoulder, because his head is buried in it.

"I did. But so did you. You gave me time. To get ready."

He scoffs. "That was only a few seconds, it's not like that made a difference."

"It did." And she knows it's true. Those few seconds had been crucial. She had been so drained, from killing the men. From the bath. The vans. From the compasses. From everything that happened that long, long, long day.

"I would have died," she says simply, and Lucas raises his head in shock.

"No, El. No way."

She nods, and the ferocity of the nod stops him, and the look in her eyes. She knows it's true. And now he does as well. They *all* do. She had been close. She had felt the darkness pulling at her. The massive amount of energy she had used to kill the Demogorgon. She had been very, very close.

He hugs her again, harder.

"Thanks," he says quietly. He smiles at her because it's getting a little sappy now, and he's not Mike. He gently sets the box aside and takes her Eggos from her, to put them in the freezer.

"Hey, man! Might as well take this one, too," Dustin calls before he can leave the room. He holds up another present, also decorated with lightsabers. "Eggos," he informs her, and she giggles. Lucas takes both boxes-one still wrapped-into the kitchen.

She hands Dustin her gift. *His* gift. He slowly unwraps it and then stares in astonishment, just like Lucas. It's not in a box. It's a tube. A tube of the Farrah Fawcett hair product Steve recommended. Will glances at it but doesn't get it. He doesn't get it, because he doesn't *know* about it. *No one* knows about it, except for Steve. And him.

He just gapes at her, and she smiles a little half-smile. She doesn't explain this gift, because she senses he wouldn't want her to. It was easy for her to come up with this one, because she listens to everyone. Because she speaks so rarely. She can always hear everyone else. She has listened to Mike, talking about Steve's hair. About how girls love his hair. She has seen the way Dustin looks at Max, when no one else is watching. She knows how much Dustin admires Steve. And Eleven is a very careful thinker. She looked

around Steve's house with great interest. She saw the spray, in a coveted place right next to the mirror on Steve's dresser, and knew what it meant, because it was right next to his comb and brush. She knew that Dustin would like it.

Dustin can't believe it. He has no idea how the hell she knew. Maybe it was the Vulcan mind-meld. He doesn't care. All he knows is that it's the best gift he's ever received, and it saves him an embarrassing trip to the store. He pulls her into a crushing hug and she smiles. But she's not finished with Dustin. Not yet. She hands him an even smaller package than the previous one, and he unwraps it eagerly. He starts to laugh as soon as he sees it. He can't help it. *Shit*. But Eleven is smiling gently at him, so it's okay. She doesn't mind.

"For your new teeth," she says, as he holds up the toothbrush to show it off.

"Thanks, El. Got to keep these pearls safe," Dustin tells her, smiling toothily at them all and purring. Lucas shudders and moves back toward the tree.

Will starts to hand her his gift, but she shakes her head. She wants Will to be last. At least until everyone else is here. Will seems to understand, because he smiles and puts the present back under the tree. She surprises Jonathan when she stands up and walks over to him. She hasn't wrapped his gift, because it's so small. It fit right into her coat pocket. She hands it to him carefully. It's a picture. He can see the name of the studio printed on the back. He flips it over curiously.

"Because you didn't have one," she says simply.

It's Nancy. She's smiling at the camera and her hair looks beautiful. It's a professional studio portrait, and it's good. Very good. And not just because the subject is Nancy. And it's true; he doesn't have a photo of Nancy. *Didn't*, anyway, until a few seconds ago. He's wanted to take her picture, but he can't, not after the disastrous last time he took her photo. When she didn't know he was taking it. When Barb was taken by the Demogorgon.

"How-how did you get this?"

Hopper and Joyce have moved closer to investigate. Joyce puts a hand to her mouth to hide her grin.

"I took it."

Hopper's eyebrows shoot somewhere near his hairline. "You took this from the Wheeler's house?"

"Yes." She had carefully chosen the best one. Nancy looks even prettier than normal, which is very pretty.

"Oh, kid. That's very nice of you and everything, but you can't steal pictures from people's houses," he tells her as gently as possible.

"I didn't."

"You didn't?"

"No. Nancy gave it to me, when I asked." Jonathan smiles, and Eleven smiles back. He leans over and pecks her on the cheek, and she smiles again. She looks surprised, and pleased. She's glad he liked her present. Which was also from Nancy. She turns her attention to Joyce, and everyone waits. Eleven's presents are more interesting than anything else in the room at the moment. Lucas sits down next to Dustin at the foot of the tree. Hopper shoots Joyce a grin, because he knows what *this* gift is. It's a long, cylindrical package, carefully wrapped. Joyce rips the paper and laughs.

It's wallpaper. The same wallpaper that currently covers her walls.

"Just in case," Eleven tells her, and looks at the wall the Demogorgon ripped. *One* of the walls, because it happened many times. She has patched them up, and patched them up *again* after the last battle, but Eleven's right. It's nice to have, just in case.

Joyce leans down and kisses Eleven gently on the cheek. Eleven smiles. She starts to turn to Hopper, but Joyce hands her a tiny gift before she can.

"Here you go, honey," Joyce says. Eleven carefully unwraps it. Inside is a black box. She opens that, too, and smiles.

"It's about time you had your first piece of jewelry," Joyce says. Eleven gently lifts it from the box. It's a pretty necklace, like the kind Nancy always wears. It has a heart on it.

"It's a locket, you can put pictures inside it," Joyce says, and takes it from her. She opens the clasp and shows her the empty spaces.

"Want me to put it on?" Joyce asks, and Eleven nods. Joyce carefully clasps it around her neck.

"Thank you," Eleven says, and Joyce smiles.

"You're welcome, honey." Eleven would kiss her on the cheek, but Joyce is too tall. Eleven gently strokes her necklace and then turns to Hopper. She gestures with her eyes for him to follow her, and walks into the kitchen. Hopper follows, and Dustin moves to follow them both until Will yanks him back down. Dustin looks irritable.

She stands in front of the fridge, and carefully removes a drawing. Will helped her with it, but it's mostly her own work, which means it's not as good as his. That's okay, though. She doesn't mind. The important thing is that she drew it. And that he will know what it means.

Hopper does know. Immediately. The picture is of a man with a hat. He's sitting on a couch, presumably watching TV. There's a little girl next to him. She has short hair. They aren't stick figures, but he remembers her first drawing well. He found it in the lab. This one is similar, except the people in it are happy. And they are at home. Over the girl, Eleven has written her name. And over the man, she has written *Dad*.

"Not Papa," she says, and he laughs.

"Yeah. Never call me Papa, kid."

She looks up at him, waiting.

"Yeah. This one's okay," he tells her. He's surprised to find that he's holding back tears. He hugs her, and then kisses her on the cheek. On *both* cheeks. His face is scratchy with hair and she smiles because it tickles. Hopper removes the magnet holding the picture.

"This goes on our fridge," he says, and she nods.

He pulls out a small box from his pocket, and hands it to her before she can leave. She opens it. It's easy to open, because it isn't wrapped. It's a watch, but an unusual one. It's almost like a bracelet, because the band is small and soft. It's blue. She looks at the bright blue band, then at Hopper. And she knows what it means. She asked him about it, a few days after he had taken her home. To the cabin home. He hadn't told her then. He told her after the gate.

"It's Sara's hairband," he had said gruffly, when she lightly stroked the blue band he always wears on his wrist. Always *wore* on his wrist, until today. Since the first day she's known him. He has turned it into a bracelet-watch for her, and she looks at him to be sure. To make sure he's okay with this. He's smiling at her and he doesn't look cranky at all, so he must be okay with it. She knows what it means to him. And now she knows what *she* means to him, too. She will keep it safe, as safe as they have kept each other. He helps her fasten it and she hugs him. She's surprised to find that she's crying. The happy tears kind, which is the good kind.

"All right, that's enough of the mushy stuff," he says, and gives her a nudge back to the living room when she's pulled herself together. When they both have.

Dustin can immediately tell that something important happened in there, and he punches Lucas on the shoulder. Lucas punches him back. They hand each other presents and start to rip them open. Hopper joins Joyce on the couch and she hands him a gift. He looks at in surprise, as if he's never seen one before. Then he gives her one, too. It's a new phone, *just in case*. Eleven helped him pick it out. Eleven says it goes well with the wallpaper.

Eleven glances over to make sure they aren't watching, then hands Will her present. He opens it. It's a night-light. The good kind. The really strong kind, the kind that nearly lights up a room.

"Because you've been in the dark too much. So you don't have to be in the dark ever again." But he doesn't need her to explain it. He already understands, just like she does. He hugs her gently and thanks her. He doesn't kiss her, she notices, although maybe that's

because he's busy picking her gift up off the mantle. It's suddenly cold in the room, and she shivers a little. She takes the present from Will when he offers it. She can see Lucas and Dustin squabbling over gifts in the corner of the room, and Joyce and Hopper on the couch. Hopper looks happy. *Everyone* looks happy. She is very happy, too, or she will be, when everyone else is here.

She unwraps the package gently. It's a white box, and taped shut. She can't quite get it open, so Will moves closer to her and they work the tape out from the box together. She smiles at him and he grins. When the tape is gone, he waits next to her. She opens the box and gives a little gasp. It's a snow globe, and it is pretty. It is more than pretty. It has a light brown base. Inside is a town square, and a big Christmas tree. Like the big tree in the Hawkins square. She saw it when they went to the lighting ceremony. Hopper allowed her to go, as long as she stayed with her friends, and away from the crowd.

She gives it a tiny shake and watches with delight as the white flakes drift down on the snow globe town. She smiles again at Will. He looks happy that she's happy.

"I saw it the other day, and thought you'd like it."

"I like it. Thank you." She hugs him for a long time. Lets him go. Remembers what you're supposed to do when you get a gift you really like, from someone on your list. She leans in to kiss him softly on the cheek, and he turns slightly in surprise, which makes her miss. She kisses him a lot closer to his mouth than his cheek, but that's okay. It still counts. Will hears Dustin catcalling them both and he blushes immediately, then smiles.

A crash from behind her makes her jump. Makes *most* of them jump. The crash sounds tinkly, like when she accidentally broke the plates at Hopper's. When she was upset with him.

She and Will both turn to see what crashed at the door. Mike is finally here.

Mike was only late because the car wouldn't start from the cold, and his parents wouldn't let him take his bike. Nancy finally talked them into it, because she knew how important the party was to his plans.

She will follow when their neighbor finishes jumping the battery. It had taken her a long time to convince them, though, and that's why he is late.

He let himself in, because that's what he does at his friends' houses. What they *all* do, although they occasionally knock once before letting themselves in. He only has Eleven's present, because it's all he could fit in his backpack. Nancy will bring the rest.

He smiles as soon as he sees the living room, because it looks like a Norman Rockwell painting. Idyllic. Dustin has replaced his hat with an idiotic Santa hat and the tree is glowing with lights. Soft Christmas music is playing. Dustin and Lucas are squabbling and laughing over presents, and even Hopper looks like he's having a good time. Maybe he's been dipping into the alcohol, who knows, but he looks happy. Joyce is unwrapping a present. Everyone looks so relaxed; happy and smiling. So different from last year that he just drinks it in with his eyes. The perfect Christmas.

No one has noticed his entrance, because they are all busy. That's okay, he's happy just watching them for a minute. He watches Eleven give Will his present. He sees Will hug her, and smiles. They have grown very close. He's not jealous, or at least not much. Maybe a *little*. He knows how stupid it is to be jealous, but she *has* grown extremely close to Will. And so quickly. She's almost as attached to Will as she is to Mike.

He sees Will give Eleven her present, and he expects it's probably something a little nicer than Eggos. He sees Will move closer to Eleven, to help her with the tape. She thanks him with her eyes, and opens the gift. And then he sees-too clearly-what the gift is. Because it's *his* gift, too. Or close enough. It's not Will's fault, because Will didn't know, but it's definitely a blow. He wanted it to be special, but he tells himself it still will be special. And besides, now she can start a collection. He sees her happiness with it, and with Will. Their heads are nearly touching as they gaze down at the delicate glass ball. He sees Eleven smile at him. And he most definitely sees her kiss him, not on the lips but almost. And then he doesn't want to see any more, because he suddenly sees *everything*.

He's horror-struck. And shocked. And ill. And a million other

emotions that are too complex for a single word. She looks so happy with Will. She's gazing at him the way she does with Mike. And no one else. And she *kissed* him. There are two possibilities. Both of them break his heart. She has been growing closer to Will, that's undeniable. And maybe that's because she *likes* him. As more than a friend. He tries to tell himself he's being an idiot, but he can't. They are so close now. *Connected*. And they've been that way ever since she came back. Looking at them together makes something hurt deep inside. He lost her once, to the Upside Down. And then she came back, and he's been terrified of losing her again. To another monster. To the secret government. Eleven has a dangerous power, and that will always make her a target. But this is the first time he's ever considered another possibility. He's always known he could lose her again. But he never thought he could lose her to someone *else*.

Or. There's a chance that she isn't interested in being anything but friends with Will. But that doesn't mean she's interested in *Mike*, either. A horrible thought has occurred to him. She may not understand what a kiss *is*. What *his* kiss meant, at least to him. Even when she almost kissed him, the night she closed the gate. Maybe she didn't understand. All this time, he thought she understood. That they were more than friends. And now he finally sees that they might not be. He isn't mad at *her*, he's mad at himself. Because he *should have known better*. For all he knows, a kiss means friendship to her. He was just blind, because of the way he felt-*feels*-about her. Because he had been hoping for something more. And now, he knows better. When he kissed her, she had looked happy. And that had thrilled him. It was a memory he revisited often while she was gone. But now he knows better. When she almost kissed *him*, it wasn't necessarily because she felt the same way.

And that's why he drops the present. He didn't mean to. His hands just couldn't hold it anymore, because it seemed to weigh too much in that moment. He barely even hears it break. They all turn to look at him, and he can't handle it. Eleven is looking at him. She looks happy to see him, just like she always does. Because he is her friend. Her best friend. And nothing more. He can't handle that right now. It would be okay, if she were alone, but everyone is watching. Everyone is seeing *him* see things clearly, and that's what he can't handle.

Will's heart sinks again, because Mike looks *awful*. He looks the way he did so often over the past year. Will can see the loss on his face. Will moves away from Eleven and waits. He isn't sure what to say, since everyone is still watching. He wishes he had Eleven's powers, because he would try to send a thought. *It didn't mean anything, it was an accident. She likes you.* But he doesn't have her power, and Mike isn't looking at him, anyway. He's looking at Eleven.

Will turns to Eleven, too. Eleven hasn't noticed that anything's wrong, although everyone else has. Dustin and Lucas are staring at each other in concern, because they have no idea what to do. All they know is that Mike is freaking out over nothing. Eleven's smiling at Mike, completely happy. Will sees it clearly. *Everyone* can see it clearly. Everyone except for Mike. You could just say, "she smiled at him," like it was no big deal, but it is. Because, while she smiles at all of them, all of the people on her list, it's different. She's always so solemn. Even when she smiles, she looks solemn. But when she smiles at Mike, it's a different smile. It's like her mouth only knows how to really smile for him. She smiles at him like he's hung the moon. When she smiles at him, it's like plugging in the bright lights on a Christmas tree. Her smile for Mike is a thousand sappy things, cliché things, but true things. It always makes Will happy. It gives him comfort, because the only good outcome from having been in the Upside Down is that smile. The fact that they found each other, because of him. And the smile is obvious to almost everyone.

Eleven smiles when she sees him. She *always* smiles when she sees him.

"Mike," she says. Completely happy. Until she sees his face. *He* isn't happy. He looks broken. He looks the way he did when she told him goodbye. The way he did every time she visited him while she was gone. The look means he's lost something important, and it's killing him. Not in the way the Demogorgon would have, but in a different way. The *inside* way. She doesn't understand why he looks that way, but her smile fades immediately. His face is paler than normal. It's so pale she can see his freckles stand out clearly, even though the room is dim and the only lights are from the Christmas lights strewn around the house and on the tree. He looks like he's near tears, and she doesn't know why. She just knows it gives her that feeling inside,

too.

In the long moment since he's broken the gift, no one has spoken except for Eleven. Finally Dustin speaks, trying to make a joke to cut the tension.

"Dude. *Finally*. Took you long enough."

Mike doesn't respond. He can feel them staring at him and he doesn't know what to do. He can only think of one thing, so he does it. He leaves.

"Mike!" Will calls, but Mike shuts the door almost gently and keeps going down the steps. He's not running away, exactly. That would be stupid. He just needs a few minutes alone, without everyone staring at him, before he can join the party. He sits on the bottom step.

Eleven turns immediately to Will, who looks sad. *What's wrong?* She doesn't know why everyone is upset now. They were all happy a few minutes ago. She looks to Will for answers, but he doesn't have any. He turns to the guys for backup.

"Leave him alone," Lucas says immediately, and Hopper concurs. Hopper and Joyce discreetly move into the kitchen to check the turkey, and Jonathan follows. Ostensibly because he's the only one that actually knows how to cook.

Eleven finally tears her gaze from Will. She doesn't know what's wrong, but she knows one thing. Mike is upset. Mike needs her. She walks over to the tree and collects her gift for Mike. Walks to the door, and bends down to collect his gift for her. Then, without a look at anyone, she opens the door.

She's relieved when she sees he's still here. He's just sitting on the step, in the cold. She sits beside him and watches him in concern until he looks at her. He sees how upset she is, on his behalf, and musters a smile to make her feel better. It's not her fault.

"Mike."

"Yeah?"

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Nothing really. I'm just sad I dropped your present," he says. It's only half a lie.

"Mike."

He knows what she's about to say, but he stops her by shaking his head.

"Really. That's it."

She doesn't look convinced. She hands him the broken present, and he puts it aside without a glance. He heard it break, after all.

"I want it," she says.

"It's broken, I think. It's okay though, it's not your real gift."

"I want that one, too." He sighs and hands it back to her. She unwraps it quickly. The actual present may be broken, but she can see what it is (or what it *was*) because the picture is right on the box. It's a snow globe. It's beautiful.

"I like it," she says, and he laughs.

"I'm sorry I broke it."

"It's okay. I like it anyway."

"But it's broken."

"You gave it to me."

He shrugs and smiles. Tells his heart not to jump when she says things like that, because she doesn't know what it means. Not to him.

She runs a finger gently over the picture. Tiny figures holding each other. She knows what they're doing, because she's seen it now. On TV. In movies. They are dancing. That makes her think of the Snow Ball. He asked her last year. She hopes he will ask her this year. She thinks about it carefully. Maybe that's why he gave her this snow

globe? But then something upset him...she thinks it through, as analytically as she can. Will gave her a snow globe. Maybe Mike thinks she wouldn't like his, because she already had one? She's not sure if that's right, but it's the best she can do.

"I like yours better," she says. And she does.

He smiles a little. He is her best friend. He is important to her, and he always will be. And that will be enough for him, because that is still *everything*. Or almost everything. Either way, it makes him feel grateful.

She hands him a present.

"For you." Then she hesitates. "Do you want it on Christmas?" She asks him, just to be sure.

"That's okay. I'll open it now if you want," he says, and she nods.

He does. It's a photo album. He glances at her, and she nods again. He opens it. The first page makes him smile. It's a picture of her. She's smiling, but it's a tiny smile. You might not be able to tell she's smiling at all. Unless you were Mike. He turns to the next page. This one is from last week, when they decorated Will's house. Mike and Eleven are smiling at each other, holding ornaments. The next page. Mike is helping Eleven down from the ladder, and they are smiling at each other. He flips the pages more quickly. Some of them are of just Eleven, and some of them are of the two of them. And a few of them are group shots. The last one in the album is just Mike and Eleven. They are on the couch. Her head is resting on his shoulder and she looks content. They both do.

He doesn't ask who took the photos, because that's obvious to him, both because they only know one photographer, and because the majority of the pictures were taken in the Byers house last week.

She waits for him to speak.

"Thanks," he says, and then waits, debating whether to say more. "You know, these are the first pictures I have of you."

She doesn't say anything, so he continues.

"And I really wanted one. When you were gone." He starts to tell her what Will did for him, but she replies before he can utter another word.

"I know."

"You...you do?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Day 218," is all she says. He stares at her for a moment, thinking. Yes. He remembers that day. He didn't remember the *number* of it, but he remembers. It's the day he had seen Will's drawing. He had come home. Gone into the basement. Started to talk to her, like he always did. Then he had started to cry.

I don't even have a picture of you. I think that's the worst part. I miss you so much and I can't even look at a picture of you. I'm scared. I'm scared I'm going to forget. I wish I knew how to draw, so I could draw you. So I could at least have that. And. Pictures are for important things. Important people. And you were important. Pictures help remind you that something happened. Without one, it's like you never existed. And I can't stand that. I can't. I can't stand that I don't have a picture of you, to remind me that you were real. That you were here. That you were important.

And he had ended the communication then, because he couldn't continue. Had been crying too hard to speak.

He looks down at the picture again. *She knew.* She has given him her picture. *Many* pictures.

"Yeah. Day 218."

She smiles at him, and he smiles back. A more genuine smile this time.

"The rest of the pages are for more pictures. Later. You can add to it."

"I will. That doesn't mean you can leave again, though," he says. He means it as a joke but she stops him with a fierce look.

"I will never leave again."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

And he's happy with that. He's happy with her, just being here with her. Happy knowing he's important to her, too. And maybe she does want to go to the Snow Ball. And maybe not. Maybe she feels the same way. And maybe not. But either way, he loves just being able to be with her.

Eleven's looking at him expectantly, but he's not sure what she's waiting for. He raises his eyebrows slightly.

"I gave you a gift," she says. She sounds like she's reminding him about something.

"Yeah. You did. Thanks, I love it."

She waits again, and she can tell he's not sure what she's waiting for.

"When you get a gift, you kiss the person," she tells him, as if he should already know that. She points to her cheek to clarify. She neglects to mention that sometimes you just hug, instead. The relief he feels is so strong and so sudden it makes him dizzy. He's still worried, but he thinks he understands what happened.

"Oh. Like you kissed Will?"

"Yes. I missed. He moved."

"Oh." And suddenly he feels a little better. A lot better, actually.

"I thought maybe...maybe you liked him."

"I do like him," she says honestly. "He's my friend." She sounds a little puzzled and he can't help smiling at the expression on her face.

"I meant...like, as more than friends."

"No." Her reply is immediate and emphatic.

"No?" He suddenly feels even better than a lot better. Fucking ecstatic, in fact.

"No. Will is only second on my list." And she smiles at him. He smiles back. He's not sure where *he* is on her list, but he can guess. He can *hope*. He's still a little uncertain how she really feels about him, but that's okay. They have time, and he finally understands that.

"I gave you a gift," she says again. He laughs. Leans in and kisses her lightly on the cheek.

"You gave *me* a gift," She reminds him. They both look at the box in her lap.

"Well. It did get broken."

She shrugs. That's not important, the shrug says. *You gave me something. Something you thought I'd like.* He holds still and waits for her to kiss him on the cheek, but she doesn't. He turns his face toward hers, and she's *right there*. She's leaning in to kiss him, and not on the cheek. It thrills him and confuses him all at once, because he still isn't sure what it means. If it means anything. Maybe it means he's her best friend. Or maybe it means he's her *more than friend*. He abruptly stops thinking when her lips get closer.

"Guys! You coming back in or what?" It's Jonathan. Mike leans backward so fast he nearly falls off the step. Jonathan looks weirdly euphoric for some reason. "Oh. Um. Take your time, I guess." He starts to close the door, nodding in approval at them both, but Lucas catches it before it can close.

"No! Not *take your time*. Get in here. We need to finish the gingerbread competition." Jonathan eyes him meaningfully and Lucas stares at him, utterly bewildered. Jonathan is acting weirder than normal. And he's usually pretty weird.

"Lucas. Shut up. Get inside. *Right now*," Jonathan hisses.

"What? What's going on? They're just *sitting* here."

Mike starts to laugh at the look of outrage on Jonathan's face. Eleven's already standing up. She smiles at Mike before going back in.

He pushes past Lucas and Jonathan, who are arguing. They sound remarkably similar to Lucas and Dustin, actually. Will gives him a tentative smile and Mike smiles back.

"He was about to kiss her, you *moron*," Jonathan whispers quietly. Mike hears him, and smiles again. No, he wasn't going to kiss her. *She* was going to kiss *him*. Whatever that means, or *doesn't* mean, it is still more than he could hope for, and he's grateful for that.